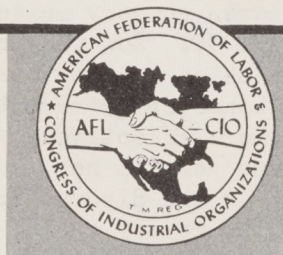
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

GEORGE MEANY
President

WM. F. SCHNITZLER
Secretary-Treasurer

JOHN W. LIVINGSTON
Director of Organization




AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE
NORMAN SMITH, California Director
805 EAST WEBER AVENUE
STOCKTON 3, CALIFORNIA
HOward 6-0384



# THE MANUFACTURED 'LABOR SHORTAGE' AND "CROP LOSS' OF 1959

The specter of "crops rotting in the fields," while grey-bearded from overuse throughout the years, apparently still frightens urban dwellers who have no way of knowing what is really happening in the countryside. The present Peach Bowl "crisis" has been manipulated cleverly by the hired propagandists of California's industrialized growers. But the deck with which these Madison Avenue farmers are playing is a trick deck, and we of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee believe the people of California deserve to know something of the jokers which this deck contains.

Joker #1. For sixteen years, growers have been getting all the workers they claimed they needed, at whatever wages they cared to offer, from foreign countries -- principally Mexico and Japan. These arrangements have, of course, driven domestic workers out of agriculture, as organized labor has observed through the years, and as the U. S. Department of Labor and State Farm Placement Service have recently conceded. Now, however, growers would have us believe that all they should be expected to do to reverse the deeply entrenched ~~area~~ pattern they have created, is to beckon. They would have us believe that, overnight, domestic farm workers who have been harrassed for sixteen years by the competition of alien contract labor should be expected to return to the farm labor market -- at the same substandard wages as those offered foreign nationals. This is a fatuous expectation, as the Madison Avenue growers themselves are perfectly well aware. But city dwellers, who probably have no inkling that California's industrialized growers used over 150,000 alien contract laborers each year, and who have no inkling of the demoralization this cheap labor has brought to the farm labor market, are beguiled by the cries of "labor shortage" and "fruit rotting on the trees."

Joker # 2. The peach crop, in many major producing areas, is badly undersized this year. Many growers neglected to irrigate in the spring, hoping to save a few dollars by waiting for rain. The rain never came. Furthermore, many growers hoped to make more money by leaving a heavy set on the trees, rather than thinning the fruit as thoroughly as they should. More peaches per tree, combined with an unusually hot, dry year, have produced more than twice the usual number of "pickles" or runt peaches. It may take a man as much as an hour to fill a fifty pound box with "pickles" -- and yet growers are paying the same piece rates this year they have become accustomed to paying their peach pickers in former years: from 10¢ to 16¢ per fifty pound box.

Joker # 3.. Peach growers accepted a lower cannery price this year than they did even in the depression years of 1939 and 1940. Now they claim they cannot afford to pay their pickers another one-fiftieth of a penny per pound. If this is true, which is dubious, we say that it behooves growers to organize on their own behalf, for the purpose of dealing more effectively with canneries and packing houses. We have said before, and we will say again, that growers have no right to take the consequences of their own disorganization out of the hides of their workers. We have said before, and we say again, that it is not the duty of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee to pull growers' chestnuts out of the fire. We are organizing farm workers. If growers choose to wait until we are organized before they organize on their own behalf, the responsibility rests with them alone, and we will remain unimpressed by their crocodile tears.

Joker # 4. Last month, growers themselves destroyed one eighth of their peaches..because they thought it would improve their profits on the remainder. Where were the crocodile tears then about "fruit rotting in the orchards?"

Joker # 5. Much of the fruit now on the trees is being destroyed because it has no market. Processers need only a limited number of "pickles" for peach jam, nectar, and other minor products. Crews of domestic workers are going out every day in Stanislaus County to pick peaches, are being forced to sort out the "pickles", and dump them on the ground. "Pickles" run as high as 70%, and pickers are usually paid nothing for the fruit they are required to dump. Where are the crocodile tears about this "fruit rotting in the orchards?"

Joker # 6. Two weeks ago, there were at least 1,000 migratory fruit workers in Stockton alone, waiting for the peach harvest. When the early picking began, hundreds of men fought to get on a 30-passenger bus going to an orchard. But when these workers got to the orchards, they found dismaying conditions. They found orchards in which the weeds and grass were hip-high. They found orchards in which water was standing three or four inches deep. One crew was taken from Stockton to an orchard near Brentwood with the promise the picking was good and the rate was 18¢ a box. When they arrived, they found the picking was poor, and they were informed the rate was 14¢ a box. Crews like these have demanded, en masse, that they be taken back to town. The workers have moved on, in disgust, to Oregon and Washington. And the Madison Avenue growers now tell us there is a "labor shortage."

Joker # 7. Grower propagandists would have us believe that inspectors from the Department of Industrial Relations have been harrassing them and forcing them to remove women and youths from the peach orchards. Here are the facts: Sections 1250 and 1252 of the State Labor Code, pertaining to the lifting and carrying of weights by women and minors, have been in effect for many years. These laws apply to agriculture as well as other industries, but they have never been enforced in agriculture, and they are not being enforced in agriculture this year. The Department of Industrial Relations has too small a staff to carry out inspection programs: it acts only on the basis of complaints. Madison Avenue growers are perfectly well aware of this. They would have us believe, however, that they are acting under Department orders in discharging women and youths. They have prevailed upon the State Farm Placement Service to discourage women and youths from going into the orchards. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committeee

has evidence that industrialized growers have been planning a full year to eliminate women and youths from certain fields when it served their purposes to do so. That they have chosen to do so at the height of what they call an "acute labor shortage" must be regarded as something more than a curious coincidence.

Joker # 8 Growers' propagandists would have us believe that the recent revelations of malfeasance in the State Farm Placement Service have "caused a breakdown in the orderly operations of the ....Service." The facts are these: No Farm Placement Representative in any Northern California area has been discharged or transferred since the "shakeup"; no change has been made in the policies under which the Service operates; the new field director of the Service is a man who has proved himself a great and good friend of growers over many years; the Service continues to supply growers with "supplemental" labor at whatever wages growers care to offer. Approximately 5,000 Mexican Nationals have been certified to pick peaches this season, and a new "supplemental" labor reservoir has been tapped through the cooperation of industrialized growers, the Farm Placement Service, and the Department of Defense. Airmen from Castle and McClellan Air Force Bases are being urged to use their accrued leave to pick peaches -- at the "prevailing rate." Growers' paid propagandists are well aware that personnel changes within the Farm Placement Service, whether at the highest or lowest echelons, are not going to affect appreciably the controlled labor system which growers enjoy. The Farm Placement Service operates under impossibly contradictory laws and administrative regulations. It is supposed to guarantee that not a single box of produce is lost because of a "labor shortage"; at the same time, it is supposed to guarantee that wages and working conditions of American farm workers are not "adversely affected " by the use of "supplemental" labor. Mortal men cannot fulfill both these guarantees, and there are no immortal men in the Farm Placement Service. When the chips are down, the Service has always honored its guarantee to growers, and in the process has necessarily dishonored its guarantee to workers.

Joker # 9. If there were a legitimate labor shortage, why has there been no upward movement of wages? Economics teaches us that when anything is short in supply and long in demand, its price goes up. If labor is in short supply, and growers genuinely want labor, why have they not taken the only steps by which any labor shortage can be overcome: increasing wages, and improving working conditions?

Joker # 10 Why did growers, the Farm Placement Service, and the U. S. Bureau of Employment Security show no interest in recruiting workers in advance of the harvest season? Why did they engage in no planning during the months of June and July? Why did they wait until the "crisis" was fully upon them before indicating by word or deed that peach pickers might be needed in California's Central Valley this year?

Joker #11. Paid publicists for the corporation growers have alleged that representatives of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee are "talking laborers out of working in the harvest by telling them 15 cents a box was not enough". Our representatives have far better uses for their time. It is

hardly necessary for AWOC representatives or anyone else to tell peach pickers the present piece rate is not enough. An experienced, conscientious worker who works ten hours and earns a gross of $1.75 does not need to be told his wages are substandard. We talked with two such workers yesterday.

Joker # 12. Growers' front men profess to be aggrieved that we of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee "have made no suggestions on what prices should be paid." We have been waiting eight years to be asked for our thinking on such matters. The law of the land theoretically requires that worker representatives be consulted. On the occasions that we have ventured our wage recommendations, they have been pointedly ignored, as was the case in the San Joaquin County tomato wage this year. We therefore find it difficult to take seriously this complaint of the Madison Avenue farmers. We find it difficult to believe their complaint was raised with any intent other than to mislead the public.

Joker # 13. Growers who wail that they cannot pay more than their present substandard wage rates should tell the whole truth. Californians might find it very intriguing. Growers are paying from 23¢ to 25¢ a box to have their peaches picked. Of this, workers receive slightly more than half. The rest is pocketed by labor contractors who have attached themselves to the throats of farm workers. Growers are not only able to pay a living wage for peach picking: they are already paying it. But that part of the wage which would make the difference between mere existence and meaningful living is being siphoned off by parasites whose principal contribution to society is to perpetuate the chaos of the farm labor market. If growers were genuinely concerned about a "labor shortage" they could very easily attract a superabundance of peach pickers by eliminating the labor contractors entirely, or reducing the size of the bite contractors are presently putting on the workers' wages.

Joker # 14. Bracero-users associations, and government agencies, with their immense resources, claim to have been unable to discover domestic peach pickers. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, with its very limited resources, through sample surveys, has uncovered many pools of such workers throughout the peach growing area of the Central Valley. To the Farm Placement Service, we say, "Look again, under your very own noses." To the Farm Placement Service, we also say, "Do not expect us to do the work for which we and the other taxpayers of this State are paying you. Do not expect us to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, any more than those of the growers. We have incontrovertible evidence that many potential peach pickers are not being utilized. You are being paid well to locate and attract these workers. Do so." It is true that some of these workers have not entered the harvest. They are waiting, in the hope that the wage will rise to a point at which they can make a tolerable living. But it is an untruth for Madison Avenue growers and government agencies to claim a "labor shortage." The truth is that there is only a cheap labor shortage.

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Growers talk of saving $7,000,000 worth of peaches. What they really want to save is a system which permits intolerable wages and working conditions, and which denies American workingmen the right to band together in an effort to improve such wages and working conditions. Growers' hired propagandists are frantically throwing dust in the public's eyes. They will continue to throw dust of the same type during the harvest of tomatoes, prunes, grapes, walnuts, cotton, and all the other crops which are yet to come this year. Madison Avenue growers are striving desperately to obscure the real issue, which is this: there is no shortage of labor, there is only a shortage of decent wages and working conditions.

We of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee trust that the people of California will wipe the dust from their eyes and see through to the truths of the farm labor "crisis." If steel workers earned $1.25 an hour, there would no doubt be a "labor shortage" in the steel industry. If bricklayers earned $1.25 an hour, there would no doubt be a "shortage" of bricklayers. Peach picking, either by color or by size, requires at least as much skill as steel or construction work. But peach pickers earn less than $1.25 an hour. Herein, Mr. and Mrs. California, lies your "labor shortage."

Madison Avenue growers know this perfectly well. They have coldly and deliberately planned and manufactured this "labor shortage." Part of this plan was the growers' total failure to recruit workers in advance of the season. Still another part of this plan is the growers' refusal to hire women and youths. California's growers, however copious the crocodile tears they shed, are quite prepared to stand by and see some peaches "spoil in the orchards." They count on getting far more propaganda value than the fruit is worth. They are playing for stakes far larger than the total value of the entire Central Valley peach crop.

California's agri-businessmen have engineered this so-called "labor shortage" and "crop loss." Their motives are crystal clear. They will stop at nothing in their efforts to destroy the union which farm workers are building. California's corporate growers are raising one million dollars to fight the union. They have retained the best Madison Avenue consultants money can buy. They are now in the process of engineering strategic "crop losses" to persuade the State and Federal Governments, and the public at large, that agriculture cannot survive without a captive, impotent, and exploited labor force.

We must concede the Madison Avenue growers are clever. They have timed their gambits so as to bring maximum embarrassment not only to organized labor but to the Administration of Governor Brown. Certain elements within that Administration, terrified by the bugaboo of "crop loss", are already in full retreat from the honorable stands taken by other elements within the same Administration.

We must concede Madison Avenue growers are lucky, too. Even their shrewdest advance planning could not have known that Dame Nature would

provide an unusually hot, dry summer, which has produced, first, an undersized crop, and second, a crop which is reaching fruition faster and more uniformly than usual.

It is difficult to beat a combination of cleverness and luck. But we of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee are herewith calling the turn on California's industrialized growers. We know we have a weapon to overcome any combination thrown into the field against it: a right cause.

We trust Californians will quickly see through the manufactured "labor shortage," and will recognize it for the wage shortage it is. We know that the decent people of this State and nation are far less concerned about an engineered crop loss than they are about the genuine human loss which has characterized farm labor for decades, and which cynical industrialized growers now strive ruthlessly to perpetuate.

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE,
STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA,
AUGUST 12, 1959

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